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ABSTRACT

This paper describes one college's individualized-instruction approach to its freshman composition courses and offers suggestions for the implementation of individualized instruction in other freshman composition programs. The paper stresses that the courses should be competency based and self-paced. Other considerations that are important include stressing the writing goals of the course, emphasizing the student as an individual with special needs, and organizing the program so that it operates smoothly; under these considerations, the paper discusses guidelines for classroom-materials selection, the course's planning, organization, and content, and the student/teacher relationship. (RL)

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## Individualizing Instruction in Freshman Composition

Strayer College is located in downtown Washington, D.C. About 25% of our day student body is made up of foreign students, about 55% are from Washington's inner city public schools, and the remaining students come from other high school backgrounds.

Teaching freshman composition to our heterogeneous freshman class had been an extremely frustrating and seemingly futile exercise. Members of the English department often felt that their freshman comp classes really made little difference to the students. It seemed that students who already knew how to write when they entered college would get the A's and B's in freshman composition, and those who couldn't write would get the D's and F's. We in the English faculty knew we were simply not helping our freshmen improve their composition skills.

So in the late sixties, we began a period of experimentation. First, we tried programmed learning, but too often students who worked easily through the programmed materials failed miserably at test time. So, we tried a prescriptive lab. But that didn't work out either, as it seemed that the students who most needed help were the very students who showed up most infrequently. The in 1970 we began to experiment with individualized instruction. And it worked.

Our entire freshman composition program has been completely individualized since 1971. We work with a student-to-faculty ratio of 15:1 in our competency-based, self-paced courses. Attendance is required, as is a minimum C mastery of all aspects of each course. When a student finishes one course of the

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freshman composition series, and there are three in the series as Strayer College is on the quarter system, the student automatically proceeds to the next course without paying extra money, changing instructor, class time or location, and without waiting till the end of the quarter.

Our materials are a series of individualized texts, written by members of our English department, and are complete with numerous reinforcement exercises and many forms of each test.

On the basis of our eight years' experience in individualized instruction and the thousands of students who have successfully completed our freshman composition program, I know that individualization can work. It may indeed be the only practical technique that will enable all students to learn. But I also know that individualization can fail. On one hand, it can fail as a system, and on the other, it can fail in its goals. Those of you who are responsible for or interested in setting up individualized programs in freshman composition must be aware of some of the measures that one can take to ensure the success, not the failure, of individualized freshman composition.

To begin with, we are talking about individualizing instruction in freshman composition. And the purpose of most comp courses is to help student improve their writing skills. Any successful program must be designed to help students do just that. The particular writing goals may differ from one department to another, and one freshman comp course may emphasize expository essays while another aims towards the writing of a research paper, but this doesn't matter. Just be sure that everything that becomes part of your comp course will actually help students learn to write.

And when considering materials to help your students meet the goals of your course, you may find a few guidelines helpful. First, it is best to give

students specific, "how to"-type instructions, even though we know that there are exceptions. It is more effective for students to learn how to write paragraphs that begin with topic sentences first. When they have mastered that technique, then you may want to expose them to some alternative methods. But the most successful approach is to begin with the basics, then add the complexities. Next, be sure materials are broken down into steps small enough that students are not overwhelmed by the seeming greatness of the task that lies before them and consequently convince themselves that they'll fail before they even make an attempt. Then too, logic dictates that materials should begin with the smallest unit of writing a student has mastered. If your students can write effective sentences and paragraphs, then let them begin with compositions. But don't expect students who have not mastered paragraph writing to be successful with compositions. It just won't work.

In setting up an individualized freshman course, you must first be sure that it will meet the special needs of each of your students. A good course should allow students to test out of areas which they have already mastered. Of course, it must also provide students with enough reinforcement or drill material so they can practice a new skill until they master it. Naturally, the drill or practice should stress writing principles throughout. Students who write more tend to write better and to develop a confidence in their writing that will make composing ultimately appear a less arduous task for them.

Just as exercises should stress writing, so should tests. In addition, be sure tests evaluate only what students are supposed to have learned at a certain point. As students are exposed to more complexities they should be responsible for them, not before.

Another important consideration of personalized courses is self-pacing. A true individualized composition course must allow students to finish the course

at varying times, so the quick students with fairly good backgrounds may complete all requirements weeks before the end of the term. Also, the course structure must not unduly penalize students with weaker backgrounds who, though they may work steadily and faithfully, simply need more time. Yet, completion of freshman composition must mean something: that a student has acquired certain skills. And students should not receive a final course grade until they master each goal of the course. This requires a grading system based on competence. Perhaps, C would be your minimal standard for passing. But regardless of the level of competence you require, an individualized freshman composition course grade must indicate the quality of work students are producing, not the quantity of it.

You should also consider the personal aspects of individualizing: those concerning the student—faculty relationship. The best structures will permit a maximum amount of actual contact time between each student and his instructor or tutor. This includes not just a certain number of minutes in private conference. It must include hours of weekly contact in a setting informal enough so that students and instructors feel comfortable enough to discuss minor problems as well as major ones, and sometimes matters that aren't problems at all.

Although we all assume that staff members who teach or tutor know the course content, an effective individualized freshman comp program requires that students be in contact with staff who are thoroughly conversant with the materials. This is especially important in teaching brighter students who really absorb skills and could easily deal with greater, not necessarily additional, challenges. A competent individualized instructor may, and indeed should, provide these challenges for the students.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of any individualized writing program is organization. It is necessary to be aware of problems that possibly

may arise and be able therefore to preclude their occurring or at least to handle them if they are unavoidable. Things like keeping student folders with progress sheets, being sure there are at least two or three forms of every test and these tests are kept secure, naturally are part of the process. But often your department must set policies or rules, too. What should you do if a student doesn't attend class? Or if he cheats? Or if he does all work satisfactorily but he works only at home? Or if he just doesn't seem to respond to the individualized structure? Or if he simply doesn't get along with you, his instructor? Naturally, part of individualizing means one will deal with each individual student's particular situation, but still, setting some guidelines in advance will greatly increase both the efficiency and fairness of your system.

Overall, then, all of these are important in individualizing a freshman composition course: stressing the writing goals of the course, emphasizing the student as an individual with special needs, and organizing the program so that it operates smoothly. With all these goals in mind, an excellent, hardworking department; an understanding administration; and a little bit of luck; your individualized freshman comp course may turn out to be one of the most effective courses in your department.